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REVIEWS

David Ewing Duncan, *Calendar: Humanity's Epic Struggle to Determine a True and Accurate Year* (New York: Avon Books 1998) 266 pp., illustrations.

This book does exactly what it claims: it delivers a history of the Western calendar that is readable and entertaining. It is not specifically directed to a scholarly audience; its usefulness to the professional scholar, therefore, is limited by a penchant for exaggeration and a questionable reliance upon "progress" and "science." Some of the timetables, dates, and facts are useful (especially the final pages, which give a chronology of calendar making), but *Calendar* is primarily directed to the layperson. Its value as amusement is not a deliberate authorial effect, but rather an unfortunate byproduct of the book's narrative style and naïve historicism. I was as distracted by the sensationalist language as the author was diverted from his intrinsically fascinating theme into a rehashing of the worst of those "one-volume" world histories, a hopscotching through portraits of "great men."

Certainly Duncan encourages a personal and approachable engagement with what might initially seem an arbitrary and esoteric subject. The treatment of time throughout history is a crucial, meaningful issue that few books have attempted to address. To forge an interdisciplinary study of time-reckoning is ambitious indeed, and perhaps some of my dissatisfaction with *Calendar* stems from the fact that Duncan succeeds in rooting himself in no discipline with authority: his history is out of date, his knowledge of literary currents scant, and his interest in science childlike.

Often the text reads as a personal flight of fancy, and one that is not the least poetic. Duncan fancies himself an old-fashioned storyteller, weaving his epic tale, but his writing ability and images fail to move this reader. He waxes most eloquent at the beginnings and endings of his chapters, which bear such titles as "A Lone Genius Proclaims the Truth about Time" (ch. 1), "Caesar Embraces the Sun" (ch. 3), "From the House of Wisdom to Darkest Europe" (ch. 9), and "Solving the Riddle of Time" (ch. 13). His desire to be accessible, manifested by such language, either sounds patronizing or ridiculous.

The focus upon the individual "everyman," in tandem with the "great man," is bathetic and even sexist. In his plan to involve his audience with his narrative grace, Duncan speaks only of Western man, and assumes that we are all Western men. The conclusion to chapter 1 is typical: "Today almost everyone takes the precision of our calendar for granted, unaware of the long threads spooling out from our clocks and watches backward in time. . . . It moves back further still to . . . when an unknown man dressed in reindeer skins and clutching an eagle bone gazed at the sky . . ." (7). What is the role of this unknown man? And why does Duncan go to the trouble of dressing him in reindeer skins and having him clutch, not just have, a bone? But even if one were inclined to identify strongly with these vivid outlines of a human, Duncan dismisses him at the beginning of the next chapter, in another rhetorical strategy, as "a Cro-Magnon version of Roger Bacon" (8), a voice crying in the wilderness.

The gender ramifications of making “everyman” biologically male are not long in exhibiting themselves. Chapter 2 is seemingly unreflectingly titled “Luna: Temptress of Time,” for Duncan must reveal, “But alas, Luna was a mere temptress where time was concerned, drawing calendar makers down a false path” (13), in short, a true woman! Duncan uses not only gender stereotypes but also conventional (and misleading) historical perceptions. He enjoys painting a picture of the Middle Ages not seen since Burckhardt: “. . . famines were frequent and often deadly. Even in good times the diet was poor: barley or millet with a few vegetables in gruel served daily with a piece of stale bread and an occasional slice of cheese or fruit” (101–102). Why must the bread be stale?

Those truly interested in medieval notions of time reckoning must ultimately venture beyond such generalized and inaccurate commonplaces. *Calendar* may be a starting point, yet even if it were the only book currently available on this topic, it would not be the best. The fascinating topic of calendars often seems merely tacked on to what Duncan seems to really want to be writing, a history of Western civilization through the lives of great men. Duncan is too interested in hero worship to evaluate his assumption that medievals had, depending on their affiliations, the same aspirations as either contemporary scientists or narrow evangelical preachers.

His evolutionary history of science through the lens of the calendar relies upon an idea of human continuity and also progress. Duncan suggests that while the calendar was irrelevant to common people (a very feminized mass excluding the occasional visionary unknown “everyman”), it was an “obsession” to the educated medieval man. Despite the evidence of Chaucer’s work as a whole, in which dates most definitely matter (think of the significance of May 3 to *Troilus and Criseyde*),³ Duncan declares that Chaucer in his famous proem “When that April . . .” was only interested in signifying the beginning of spring in vague terms: “. . . he evidently has little interest in the actual year or date . . .” (103). Why so? Duncan parries, “. . . why should he? He was writing for an overwhelmingly agricultural people closely connected to the soil, for whom time was more than anything a powerful constant . . .” (103). But Chaucer was educated and most likely writing for an urban elite, as Paul Strohm has persuasively argued in *Social Chaucer*,⁴ just the sort of people who should, and did, have an interest in time and wanted calendars for their bourgeois and mercantile endeavors.

In the name of his epic, Duncan simplifies issues of time into a fundamental, well-worn antithesis of the church versus science, sacred versus secular time. While his own examples of Boethius and Abbot Benedict confuse the point (both men are religious but also interested in “objective” time), Duncan does not explore these contradictions to his theory. His statements become predictable: “Bede went further than most towards embracing objective sci-

³Also considered a “dismal” or “unlucky” day in the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” May 3 in Ovid is the festival of the licentious Flora. Chaucer appropriately selects this date for line 56 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, book 2, in order to foreshadow the lovers’ failure.

⁴Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA 1989).

ence, but he remained limited by the mind-set of his era's spirituality" (91). Duncan is seemingly not aware of his own limited mind-set.

There does seem to be a place for a readable book that will synthesize some of the more difficult arguments of Einstein and Hawking with exciting cultural, literary, and historical work on notions of time in the past. But Duncan wastes his opportunity, preferring to tell us how Caesar's love for Cleopatra, amongst other familiar themes and exaggerated fluxes, "gave the West its calendar" (7). I learned many facts, nevertheless, from this book, but they are of the kind that could only be garnered by a leisurely reading over a span of two weeks.

Duncan is on the right track, yet his annoying narrative will continually frustrate the academic seeking a quick access to facts. His pretension to a "popular" audience is hampered by the exclusionary nature of the gender stereotypes and historical expectations he employs. A better history of calendar-making might reflect the complexity of attitudes to time, both in the medieval and the modern period. There is no truth, no objectivity in time reckoning, as Duncan himself acknowledges, facetiously terming it "ironic." Why then place an exploration of human attitudes to time in a progressive, wrong to right framework? Duncan does a disservice not only to the medievals with their stale bread, but also to his own contemporaries, by writing an outdated book on time.

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